

# SPRINGS

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PUPPETS AT THE HANDS OF WATER: SEX WORKERS IN MONGLA,  
BANGLADESH

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On a summer afternoon in 2022, I made the long drive from Jessore to Mongla, a port city in southern Bangladesh. My route took me through Bangladesh's riverine ecosystem—a lush green landscape where water dominates the land. I followed the rivers winding their way through the earth as if left to their will, and from the corners of my eyes I could see the little huts of local farmers and fishermen. Mongla Port is known for its sex workers, who historically worked either on the mainland or on boats and were accordingly referred to by the villagers as “sex workers on water” (*jala beśya*) or “sex workers on land” (*sthala beśya*). The coexistence of these two terms reflects a common practice in the littoral geographies of Bangladesh, where names of occupations often hint at the land/river dichotomy.<sup>1</sup> Yet as the ongoing climate crisis has led to sea-level rise and erosion, many littoral sex workers have lost their occupational land to the adjoining river and have been rendered amphibious (*ubhachara*)—working both on land and water. The villagers now call all the women *jala beśya* (water prostitutes)—although this is technically a misnomer. They avoid using a term that assigns animal-like attributes to humans, such as the amphibious nature of frogs, because humans are conventionally considered hierarchically superior to animals.



One of the sex workers attempting to fix the eroding coast with mud from the water. © Amrita Dasgupta. All rights reserved.



Fig. 1. During Cyclone Amphan, a snail that lived in our open bath needed a dry place to lodge for the night since the open bath was already submerged in water. It dragged itself to the top of a plastic bottle in the dining room, its shell shining in the candlelight as it dried. © Amrita Dasgupta. All rights reserved.

I am interested in the situation of Mongla's sex workers as it illustrates the precarity of those most vulnerable to climate change. Due to Bangladesh's low elevation and location on one of the largest and most densely populated river deltas in the world, the country's landscape and the lives of its people have long been shaped by seasonal flooding and a dynamic riverine environment. Yet climate change has intensified these natural processes, placing Bangladesh at particularly high risk of extreme-weather events, including repeated cyclones, heavy monsoons, extreme heat, and drought. Sea-level rise not only threatens people's homes but also disrupts livelihoods, as increasing salinity of soils and water affects agriculture and fishing.<sup>2</sup>

I have been researching the lives and livelihoods of the Sundarbans islanders in Bangladesh and India for over a decade, and they often describe a life characterized by the quotidian straddling of water and land. But as my own home slowly filled with water during Cyclone Amphan in 2020, and my family was forced to live an amphibious alternative for a night, I was moved to reflect more deeply on the excruciating reality of everyday life in this region. We talk about the precarity sea-level rise brings about, but it is notoriously difficult to learn about the effects climate change has on the individual, the personal effects. It is even more difficult to learn about the experiences of Mongla's sex workers because, as I learnt when I went to see them, their land

is difficult to access, and they are marginalized and regarded as "untouchables" as they pursue an occupation considered immoral and dirty by locals, who would not give advice on how to find them—and they don't want to be interviewed.

Mongla Port was established around 1950 on the Passur River. It was developed to offer extra capacity after the port in Chittagong proved insufficient to handle the increased volume of seaborne trade since Partition had cut off East Pakistan's access to the Port of Calcutta in 1947.<sup>3</sup> The new port in Mongla became an important international hub, with British and Indonesian sailors and merchants docking regularly.<sup>4</sup>

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Since the 1800s, Bengal's waterways had taken merchants across the subcontinent, where they engaged in sexual encounters with women with ambiguous social status inhabiting the coasts. These "in-between" women were chaste wives who allowed sexual interaction without payment to prevent being kidnapped and abandoned in faraway lands. However, the history of the Mongla brothel is slightly different. Sexual cultures in the vicinity had existed long before the brothel's establishment. Initially, women identifying as singers and dancers in nearby villages engaged in sex work. They were eventually pushed out of their space as the patriarchal, upper-class society felt they were a threat to morality, and the women were thus forced to deforest the land on the coast near the Sundarbans to make a living. These workers became part of a "ghat" economy where merchants not only sold their products, but these women also performed sex work in exchange for money—placed

at the transition between the land and the shore. When Mongla Port was built, these littoral economies expanded. Common lore from across the world reflects how “every sailor has a woman in every port,” meaning active ports are accompanied by brothels, as is the case in Mongla.<sup>5</sup> Beginning around the 1990s, labour unrest, river siltation, and consistent bad weather contributed to the steady decline of Mongla Port. Nonetheless, the local bordello survived, and it now stands on the eroding banks of the Passur River.<sup>6</sup>

Customers of the Mongla brothel hire launch boats and visit the brothel to spend the night there. On Saturdays the sex workers stand on the eroding embankment with their saree-draped bodies on display. The brothel is accessible by means of the temporary bamboo stairs that tilt from the coast to the eroding embankment (figure 2). Customers anchor their launch boats along the crumbling embankment of the brothel and wait there to select the woman they best like. Once the selection is made, they pay the money and are escorted to the nearby huts by a male brothel worker. This is, more or less, the daily life of the sex workers of the sinking brothel.



Fig. 2. The Mongla Port brothel on a Saturday. © Amrita Dasgupta. All rights reserved.

I began my research with two days of local ethnographic studies, observing from across the bank on which the brothel stands and talking to residents and workers about the brothel, access to it, and their perception of it. After this, I went to visit the brothel and start my field-based research. The people who ferry the boats for daily work from one side of the Passur River to the other pointed me to the boatman Hasan Bhai, who brings customers to the brothel. He advised me to talk to Hamida Apu, the chief madam of the bordello, famously known as the Baniashanta.

When I first met Hamida Apu, I found her sitting in her room, annoyed by my visit, which she had been informed about beforehand. She told me:

Everyone who comes here apart from customers, I mean journalists, photographers, researchers, they keep asking us the bad questions. We are not always comfortable to speak about our life and how we ended up here. It makes us sick. We want to vomit. It is not a good feeling. Can't you all find some other way to do this—to know about our lives by not asking us direct questions like "who trafficked us here?" Do we only have one story to tell? And that too in a hurtful, disrespected manner? We should be pricked again and again to remember the bad things at the beck and call of people? At the comfort and need of others? We cannot take our time; we cannot do it at our space and time? Anyway, there are more grave issues at hand than this. We keep doing the same thing daily. Wake up. Battle the waters that eat our land. Attend to customers. Sleep.<sup>7</sup>

Hamida Apu was complaining about the gaze that objectifies people like her—people from ostracised professions. She was not okay with plating her trauma-inducing life experiences for the eyes and ears of journalists, researchers, or photographers. However, she was not entirely opposed to talking about the sex workers' life experiences. She just wanted to do it differently—at their own pace.



Fig. 3. One of the sex workers of Baniashanta goes into the water to catch fish. © Amrita Dasgupta. All rights reserved.

I realised that if I was going to respond to Hamida Apu's concerns and build rapport with the sex-worker community, I would have to avoid asking direct questions. I therefore devised a different methodology to collect ethnographic data from the Mongla brothel workers. Instead of conducting

semistructured interviews, I used arts-based research. Here, artistic practices—such as dance, theater, or painting—offer a window into a community’s lived experiences. The artworks become the content or data that readers or viewers can engage with emotionally.<sup>8</sup> Given the sex workers’ reluctance to be interviewed, the arts-based method allowed me to understand, respect, and accommodate their emotions, while generating information equal to that that I might have gathered from questionnaires.

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In particular, I chose to facilitate a “living-archive” process, where sex workers’ lived experiences and memories would be at the heart of the research. This power-sensitive approach can take into account caste, class privileges, and intersectionality, and leaves space for community-generated research questions—perhaps touching on the “grave issues” Hamida Apu mentioned.<sup>9</sup> It is in line with approaches that decolonise Western methodologies and demystify the methods of modern academia that have been part of colonial apparatuses.<sup>10</sup>

In a six-month-long arts workshop, I provided the sex workers with themes that spoke to the interview questions I had prepared: *jibon* in Bengali, meaning “life” in English; *bondhu*, meaning “friend”; *jol*, meaning “water.” Based on these themes the participants made drawings and paintings. Having completed the works, they spoke about what life experiences their drawings represented in the context of the given theme.



Fig. 4. Champa's painting of the Baniashanta brothel. The Bengali text says: "On the four sides of our habitation we have the river. Erosion of the coast affects our homes. We bear losses. We have meagre income, but we need to spend more than what we earn." © Anonymous creator. All rights reserved.

I remained interested in the sex workers' relationship to the water. When the 25 participants drew on this theme, they brought forward many revealing angles. One among them, Champa, drew all the houses on the embankment. She explained that those houses belonged to the people of her community. Yet Champa drew the huts in the village beyond the brothel in pencil and refrained from colouring them. She explained that the colours of the huts in the brothel space helped her to signify the nature of her fellow workers. She knew them well. However, she continued, she had no such familiarity with the villagers and thus could not depict their nature with a colour of her choice (figure 4). Champa also "inverted" the widely accepted "grammar" of colour and did not identify green to signify jealousy: To her it meant evergreen—the undying youth of her friend, also a sex worker at Mongla.



Fig. 5. Hamida Apu's painting inspired by the theme of water. The Bengali text says: "Mongla Brothel suffers from coastal erosion. We spend days in hunger. We are very helpless!" © Anonymous creator. All rights reserved.

Each drawing is revealing in its own right and offers information not accessible through direct or indirect questionnaires. Strikingly, Hamida Apu left the water space uncoloured (figure 5). She related to colours as reflecting a specific character and explained that the water was white to her. It is true that if you look at the water surrounding the Passur, it looks white—maybe because of the silt. However, the character of the water space and why she left it uncoloured, she reasoned, was not because the water was laden with silt, but because the water had no fixed character. It was the benevolent water that brought them customers, while it was its evil side that hammered the eroding coasts.<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 6. Sophia's interpretation of the future of Baniashanta. © Anonymous creator. All rights reserved.

Another participant, named Sophia, coloured the water green (figure 6). According to her everything would turn into a field as the waters silt up. She looked at water with hope, wishing for the water to not eat away their occupational land but for the water to move away.<sup>12</sup>

The community presented a range of emotions, but the one that they were unable to process is the emotion they have for the river water that surrounds them. They are rarely asked about the ecology of the place they find themselves in and are not used to talking about it—the focus has always been on their work, with regards to coercive migration, sexual partners, and the business. This is why it takes them some time to speak out about their emotions towards the water, or even depict them through art. They shared that sometimes they are grateful for the water, which brings them fish, and sometimes they are sad that it eats away their land, but mostly they are frustrated that water should have such an influence on their daily lives. They would describe themselves in Bengali as *jol besha noy jol putul*, meaning “not a water prostitute but a puppet at the hands of the water.”

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The water is their means of survival, and the embankment, now eroding, is indispensable. It is here that they live and work. Staying and doing research with the sex-worker community exposed me to this “grave issue.” The river water that surrounds them is the main artery that brings staple customers to the brothel. When I saw one of the women, who had climbed down the embankment, taking mud

from the ground and placing it on the crumbling, exposed coast, trying to fix it, the horror of this “amphibious alternative” was visualized (cover image).

In old times, when ships moved on the Passur River, seamen, sailors, and boatmen crowded into the brothel for entertainment and the fulfilment of carnal desires. With time, the riverbed accumulated silt, and consequently big ships ceased their visits to the Mongla Port. This affected the customer count. Today, the main clients are usually local men who picnic in the Sundarbans region on the weekend.



Fig. 7. The eroding embankment is slowly being "swallowed by the river." © Amrita Dasgupta. All rights reserved.

The sex workers were unable to process not only the effects of the climate crisis on their work—something that will soon render them ecological refugees—but also their helplessness in fighting the government. Indeed, they are losing their land to the water and every day they live in fear of their land being swallowed by the river, but they are also paid regular visits by another party: the Land Revenue Office, an arm of the local government in Banishanta. The community asks for their rightful resettlement. They have been repeatedly turned down based on the land erosion and accretion law. This law states that if someone loses their land to erosion, they will receive rightful and legal rehabilitation for the affected land;<sup>13</sup> however, such rehabilitation can only be claimed if the person who lost their land can prove ownership of the land. The inability of the sex-worker community to show land-ownership papers, as past generations of sex workers did not officially transfer the ownership, traps them in legalities and denies them the right to rehabilitation. It means that they will be left inoperative once they lose their land to the water.

The sex workers of Mongla are river women, not meant for the ordinary life on land or water. They are caught in a unique in-betweenness—an amphibious alternative. For a long time, they were denied space in graveyards and thus buried their dead companions on their occupational land, witnessing such riverine cycles of life, death, and water burial. As if “to water they belong and to

water they return” and not “to dust.”<sup>14</sup> When the body rolls over into the water, scattering drops that reach the shores, the friends of the dead chant “Santih, Santih, Santih”—peace, peace, peace—as if celebrating that the ostracised life of struggle, hate, and abandonment has at last come to an end.<sup>15</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Shailendra Biswas, *Samsad Bangla Abhidhan* (Sahitya Samsad, 1957), 329.

<sup>2</sup> Thaslima Begum, “Only the Rich Can Bear This Heat: How Dhaka Is Battling Extreme Weather,” *The Guardian*, 3 October 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/oct/03/only-rich-can-bear-heat-dhaka-bangladesh-battling-extreme-weather-climate>; Syed Sajjad Husaín and Hugh Russell Tinker, “Bangladesh,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, published 26 July 1999; last updated 20 August 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bangladesh/Drainage>; Saleemul Huq, Mizan Khan, A. K. M. Saiful Islam, and Afsara Binte Mirza, *Climate Change Impacts in Bangladesh: What Climate Change Means for a Country and Its People* (International Centre for Climate Change and Development, 2024), [https://www.icccad.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Bangladesh\\_Final\\_Covers\\_26-Jan-2024\\_ONLINE\\_compressed.pdf](https://www.icccad.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Bangladesh_Final_Covers_26-Jan-2024_ONLINE_compressed.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> I. S. Maxwell, “The Development of the Ports of East Pakistan,” *Geography* 42, no. 1 (1957): 64–66.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Bremner, “The Sinking Brothel,” *VICE*, 2 April 2018, <https://matthewembremner.com/2018/04/02/sinking-brothel-vice/>.

<sup>5</sup> James Francis Warren, *Pirates, Prostitutes and Pullers: Explorations in the Ethno- and Social History of Southeast Asia* (UWA Press, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> “History,” *Year Book 1984–85* (Port of Chalna Authority, 2004), 8–10. See also Amrita Dasgupta, “The Accommodating Apparatus: Drawing the Life of Sex Work on the Eroding Coasts of Sundarbans,” *History and Environment Journal* 30, no. 2, <https://doi.org/10.3828/whp.eh.63830915903585>.

<sup>7</sup> Hamida Apu in conversation with the author. Fieldwork, Khulna (Mongla), Bangladesh, February 2022. The names of the interviewees and interlocutors have been changed and kept anonymous as per their informed consent. The participants in the study were selected through purposeful sampling; the study was then conducted within the informal community setting of the Mongla Port brothel. Later, sample selection was also done through the snowball method—an approach where each participant leads to another participant via referral.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth de Freitas, “Contested Positions: How Fiction Informs Empathetic Research,” *International Journal of Education and the Arts* 4, no. 7 (2003): 11–22.

<sup>9</sup> Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research* (Oxford University Press, 2015); Stephen Pfohl, *Death at the Parasite Café: Social Science (Fictions) and the Postmodern* (St. Martin’s Press, 1992); Randy Stoecker, “Challenging Institutional Barriers to Community-Based Research,” *Action Research* 6, no. 1 (2008): 49–67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750307083721>.

<sup>10</sup> Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, “Introduction: Critical Methodologies and Indigenous Inquiry,” in *Handbook of Critical Indigenous Methodologies*, ed. Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (SAGE, 2008), 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483385686.n1>.

<sup>11</sup> Dasgupta, “Accommodating Apparatus.”

<sup>12</sup> Amrita Dasgupta, “A Step Forward in Methods for Arts-Based Research in the Anthropocene: A Series Reflection,” *NiCHE*, 19 July 2023, <https://niche-canada.org/2023/07/19/a-step-forward-in-methods-for-arts-based-research-in-the-anthropocene-a-series-reflection/>.

<sup>13</sup> In Bangladesh, erosion and accretion are regulated under common-law principles. Specific regulations do not exist, but the Bengal Alluvion and Diluvion Regulation of 1825 remains the foundation. State of Haryana, *The Bengal Alluvion and Diluvion Regulation, Act 11 of 1825*, as published on 1 November 1956, Indian Kanoon, accessed 22 September 2025, <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/126865412/>.

<sup>14</sup> In Genesis 3:19, New King James Version, the human life cycle is defined as “For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return,” which is explained in Ecclesiastes 3:20 as “All are from the dust, and to dust all return.”

<sup>15</sup> Dasgupta, “Accommodating Apparatus.”



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